

Us, Them and the Peace of God

(Luke 4:21-30)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 3, 2019

In the name of the one God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.

As someone who steps into this pulpit to preach on a regular basis, I usually spend time once the sermon is done reflecting on how what I have said may have resonated with the congregation. I am often blessed with comments and feedback of one form or another, ranging from points that were especially liked or struck someone with particular strength to questions or disagreements about a statement I may have made. In all of these I am thankfully blessed, regardless of what I hear, by the fact that any feedback or comments are offered with honesty and sincerity.

Never, however, have I had to worry about delivering a sermon that affects someone so much that they want to end my life. That was certainly not the experience of Jesus in today's reading from Luke's gospel. As you will recall, Jesus has just returned to his hometown of Nazareth, and on this particular Sabbath morning he has gone to attend the service at the town synagogue with his family and friends. After being handed the sacred scroll, he opened it up to a passage from Isaiah that he wished to share and read it to those assembled.

And then he said something that one would think would be the trigger for a response: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." *The words I have just read, he is saying – the words of the prophet Isaiah telling of the one who would come embodying the power of the Spirit – are now a reality because I am here.* Think about that for a moment, and then shift gears to this new thought: In a time when many rained down the word "blasphemy" upon Jesus because of his words and deeds, this statement – "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" – is not what set the crowd off.

No, what gets their blood boiling and made them angry enough to drag Jesus to the top of a hill outside town and then try to throw him off were the words he spoke next. It was his revelation to the people of Nazareth that he was not there for them, and the point that they would not be "the vessels for the unfolding of God's new narrative."¹ The crowd had come that day to see someone whose fame was building and to hear some good news, and instead they were struck with a dose of hard reality – and in a way one commentator referred to as a "tongue-lashing out of left field."²

¹ David L. Ostendorf, "Luke 4:21-30: Theological Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*, p. 310.

² Peter Eaton, "Luke 4:21-30: Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*, p. 311.

This new reality was that the coming kingdom would not be unveiled by those who would seem to be the natural choices – the ones faithful in worship and in adherence to God’s word, later referred to by Paul in his letter to the Romans as righteous in the law. To the contrary, the revelation of God’s kingdom would come about through those who had been ... to go back to the words of my sermon from last week ... “othered.”

The new kingdom would be built on the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed – the ones over there, not right here. And as if that were not enough ... as if that alone did not set those listening to him on edge ... Jesus reminds them of moments in Israel’s past when God reached out to others. He reminds them of the moment when Elijah is commanded to go the home of a widow in Sidon – a nonbeliever – to “make known both God’s presence and God’s power”³ in providing for her during a drought and saving her son who was on the verge of death.⁴ He uses as a second example the healing of Naaman, a commander of the armies under the control of the king of Syria – again, not a member of the nation of Israel but an “other.”

That is what made the people angry on that morning in Nazareth. It was these words – that God was looking over there, not right here – that made them enraged enough to want to throw Jesus off a hill. And in their eyes, what Jesus had said changed the way they thought of him. He was “the insider who suddenly becomes an outsider.”⁵ Jesus was now an “other.”

All they heard that day was what was on the surface of what Jesus said. In their surprise and shock at what they were being told they ***missed*** the ***deeper*** meaning: the call to “pay attention to these persons who are of special concern to God!”⁶ Through the words of Isaiah, Jesus was cluing in the people of Nazareth ... and people down through the centuries since ... that while we can have a personal relationship with God, God is not ours alone. God cares for us, but God does not care for us alone. God loves us, but God does not love us alone.

Jesus is removing the mirror of self-interest and self-concern ... removing the concern just for self and allowing our unqualified, unencumbered interest and concern to go outward. We are being reminded of the “other” and given an opportunity to look and see how they may feel when they discover that the love of God ... and our interest and concern ... is coming for them. How much will they feel elevated from the despair in their lives when they find that they are the focus of love and the foundation of the kingdom?

There is one final point from this passage that I think is incredibly powerful. Jesus has preached; the people are shocked and enraged; the people want to throw him off the hill. This is a highly emotional passage – but it is a passage that ends with what is for me an incredible moment. In the midst of this hostility and fury, “he passed through them and went on his way.”⁷

³ Ostendorf, p. 308.

⁴ 1 Kings 17.

⁵ Ostendorf, p. 310.

⁶ Howard K. Gregory, “Luke 4:21-30: Pastoral Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*, p. 308.

⁷ Luke 4:40 (NRSV).

That is all – a simple moment. Jesus is not caught up in the emotion of the crowd; without speaking another word, he quietly moves through the crowd and walks away. In this time of angst and anxiety, in these moments of hostility and tension, he displays powerfully the peace of God. The peace of God that I speak of in the blessing of the congregation each week is the peace that Jesus displays here. The peace that passes all understanding. The peace that is more powerful than the emotions of that crowd and more expansive than that Galilean hillside was present in Jesus. And it was a peace that in this single moment he gave to them and left with them.

This passage from Luke gives us a lot to ponder. I invite you to consider all of these things in the days ahead – to consider how others might feel when receiving the love of God, and to consider how we ourselves might feel when in those moments of high tension and raised emotions we, like that crowd on that day, might feel when the peace of Jesus passes through us.

Amen.